

Indian Railway's citizen engagement mechanism for enhancing Customer Responsiveness and Service improvement

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BHATI, GOPAL SINGH

CAPSTONE

Submitted to

KDI School of Public Policy and Management

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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CHAPTER 2

Indian Railway's Citizen Engagement Mechanism for Enhancing Customer Services and Responsiveness

By

Gopal Singh Bhati

KDI School of Public Policy and Management¹

Executive summary

Indian Railway (IR), as one of the largest railway systems in the world, had to deal with the enormous passengers' demands. In an effort to revolutionize passenger services, IR adopted a social media-based citizens' engagement system through which passengers and IR staff can communicate in pursuit of better services. However, the new idea alone did not make a difference in the process of implementation. Using social media as an unprecedented communication channel, IR gradually learned by doing. Going through a multi-staged implementation process, IR developed the social media-based service system from manual, haphazard, and mechanistic model to automated, sophisticated, and organic one. As a result of the ardent trial and errors, the new customer relation management (CRM) system turns out to be effective in improving internal operation, external accountability, and most importantly, citizens trust.

¹ Gopal Singh Bhati is a graduate student of KDI School of Public Policy and Management. He is Indian Railway Service official and who has been working for the Indian Railway for the past 11 years. He has worked in domain of transport service delivery. His areas of interest are organizational management and transformational leadership. He is currently working on how this upcoming digital disruption affecting public service delivery. This digital edge can be utilized in effective monitoring and enhancing outreach. He is firm believer of empowering citizens in true democratic spirits for attaining good governance objective.

1. Background and challenges

Indian Railway (IR), often quoted as lifeline of Nation, is one of the world's largest railway networks comprising 115,000km of track over a route of 67,312km and 7,112 stations. It is owned and managed by Government of India through Ministry of Railways.

With nearly 1.4 million employees and revenue of nearly INR 2 trillion, Indian Railways is the eighth largest organization of the world. The Indian Railway (IR) has been the only organization serving 23 million of users by operating thousands of services each day. It also carries more than 1.2 billion tons freight every year. The challenges confronting IR were huge because of the big gap between passengers' expectations and the public organization's responsiveness.

The Development Challenges

IR is characterized by the diversity of passengers. To cater variety of customer needs, IR operated various classes of passenger services and trains. Such unprecedented variety and volume of operations make it extremely challenging to meet expectation of customers. Unmet expectation frequently lead to complaints. IR has known to have highly satisfied to highly complaining passengers. The Railway Minister realized that this challenge requires innovative solution. He decided to make use of social media for meeting varied expectations of passengers.

Traditionally, grievances of rail passengers have been addressed through conventional means of complaint books, letters, e-mails, phones etc. In the recent past, CPGRAMS (Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring Management System) portal of government of India and COMS (Complaint Management System SMS, APP, Web) portal of Indian Railway have been introduced for receiving grievances from the passengers /rail users and public at large. IR has introduced social media platforms to provide immediate assistance to rail passengers for their tweets received on twitter handles of Ministry. This has been found to be more effective and assistance is being provided to passengers on real time basis.

The Initial Intervention and the Delivery Challenges

To resolve the confronting issue, in November 2014, new railway minister Mr. S. Prabhu joined this mammoth organization, and has started his long journey to revamp the organization. He and his team initiated a new approach to customer services using social media. Director (information and publicity) of Ministry Mr. Vedprakash refreshes his memory as "This system of social media came into existence unintentionally. We were already using two mechanisms in customer grievance in form of all India toll number second the manual system of register at each station. We never thought beyond this as this system was working stably. Somewhere in year 2015, one fellow train passenger Twitted to minster on his personal handle regarding some railway irregularity. It was taken by minister in different perspective. Minister realized that the present system has limitations. The gap between passengers' expectation and service quality still needed to fill. He came up with idea why not we should incorporate this Twitter tool for solving problem and reaching to our customer. As it was user friendly and instant to respond. Even it is visible and tangible. This is how Twitter Seva born in IR."

With a view to improve the travelling experience of passengers, Indian Railway have introduced social media platforms, like twitter handles of Ministry of railways @RailMinIndia as well as twitter handles of all general managers and Divisional railway managers of Indian railways to provide assistance to passengers on real time basis and prompt disposal of their grievances 24 by 7 where passengers also share their experiences and give suggestions.

To manage the issues being raised on social media by the public in general and travelling passengers, an IT enabled Social Customer Relationship Management (social-CRM) Tool is being used in railway board. On an average 18000 tweets are received. The immediate actionable tweets of passengers, either from running trains or from stations, being forwarded to the concerned officials are normally attended and resolved by them within the shortest possible time. Quick and prompt assistance to passengers through social media made ministry's twitter handle @RailMinIndia for being able to quickly and promptly provide assistance to passengers, the twitter handle of the ministry reached one million follower mark on 27th April 2016, two million mark on 29 March 2017.

However, the first step toward the innovative service using social media did not go further without encountering new challenges. However, handling large number of tweets manually was very difficult. The insightful idea alone did not help resolve the operational details. There was no idea as to how many tweets were being managed, how many to address or resolve. Let alone the real-time resolutions, generating insights/MIS reports was hardly possible.

The twitter posts were being screened manually among the barrage of tweets to provide necessary assistance to the passengers. In this process, many others got ignored. There used to be no accountability on agents, no quality check, no collaboration was possible among the staff on cases. Staff had adopted primitive route of using registers to take note of few tweets that they could respond to in a day. Further, while working on these tweets, no insights could be generated such as how many complaints, suggestions or feedbacks, what were the issue types, which division/zone did they pertain to etc. One could never go back and search or filter these tweets, flipping pages of the register was the only way of functioning. Staff had to manually update the nature of issue, Railway department zone and divisions to which the issue pertains to. They also had to identify the urgency of the issue and type of issue. There was no accountability. All these affected their efficiency and only a small set of issues could be handled.

Figure 2-1 | Basic workflow of Twitter Seva



Timeline

Jul.4.2014. Twitter Handle @RailMinIndia was created.

Dec.3.2015. A Customer Complaint Management Cell was setup in Railway Board to monitor complaints on social media.

Jun.15.2016. Integration of social media for complaint management.

Aug.1.2016. Twitter handle of Minister of railways integrated with complaint management.

Apr.27.2016. Twitter handle of ministry of railways @RailMinIndia reached one million follower mark.

Dec.11.2016. Twitter handle of ministry of railways @RailMinIndia reached two million follower mark.

Mar.29.2017. Twitter handle of ministry of railways @RailMinIndia reached 2.5 million follower mark.

2. Tracing the Implementation Process

Phase 1: Institutionalization of proactive intervention

Use of social media was not actually demanded by passengers in the first place. Rather it started with the minister's initiative. Following the "top-down" proactive intervention, then organizational structure and process was institutionalized to see the idea through.

To begin with, the minister made Director (I&P) to operate handing of railway Tweets. Mr. Vedprakash added "It all started in my 10 feet by 10 feet chamber as additional duty. I was not sure how I was going to do as it was blind game plan with no experience. I was asked to setup some basic infrastructure and we bought two i-pads. I used to scan all the Tweets in bits and pieces along with my major work of circulating information and broadcasting railway's regular work to press and media. Sometimes I was not able to see the Tweets, sometimes minister replies directly, sometimes he sends me short message on some technically tricky complaints and balance time I personally look and reply".

This initial system was very raw information exchange system in which either we reply passenger's grievances centrally or their issues were sent to field unit/zonal for remedy. It was more manual and discretionary in nature. It was just reflection of how directors and minister treat that issue. There was no prioritization. Even systematic approach was lacking. There was no consistency. Twitter wall was getting input all day and night but the responder works on it during day time with no continuum. Sometimes they miss important ones and sometimes they overemphasized small issues.

As Mr. Ved Prakash pointed out, “It was just two men show, we were both actor and producer/director. Due to destiny, whatever quantum we spent on Twitter mode, it generated multifold response from user. It started with manageable double digit and touched three digit Tweets within few months timespan.

I am not sure what this increase in number reflect, whether we were in right track or existing system was not as successful in contrast to our belief. But this additional path created ray of hope as effective mode of communication between us which was missing for ages. To handle this increasing activity, we now need team and structuring the whole process”.

At this situation, the Ministry started streamlining whole process, and Twitter cell was created in December 2015. They searched some computer operators from existing railway system and started with five people and one counter. It was put under Executive Director (Public grievance). This counter operates in two shift—6 AM to 2 PM, and 2 PM to 10 PM. New Twitter handle **@RailMinIndia** was started. It was different from using minister’s personal handle by Director (I&B). All the 16 zonal heads and 64 division heads Twitter handle were created.

Phase 2: Expanded institutionalization of external services

The initial organizational reform in terms of structure and process to operate social media-based customer service was only the first step toward enhancing customer responsiveness, so it kept being supported by expanded institutionalization.

Miss Anchal who was one of initial persons in cell shares her experience “Initial days we tried to capture all the Tweets in 6 AM to 10 PM duration. We were always confused of how to assign them priority as we were not having railways managerial experience. For us all Tweets seem important. Then we discussed this issue with new ED R. Kumar and settled down our focus on actionable task needed during any emergency and on deficient passenger amenities. I remember initial days one medical emergency case reported in Tweet. Fellow passenger health was deteriorated while undergoing journey.

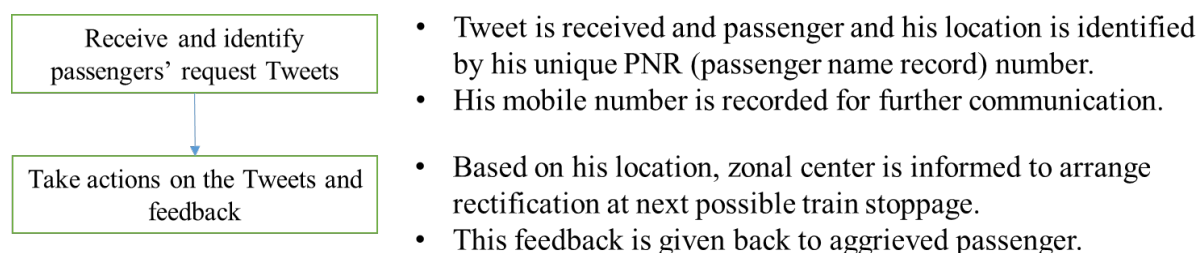
We immediately located his location and sent this information to concern zonal center by Twitter and phone too. We arranged medical team at next station and medication was provided. Passenger retweeted us back on this work which made me feel proud and happy. We did something good. These series of problem solving task consists from watering in train to smoke detection in underneath, arranging milk for infant to wheelchair for paralyzed person, finding missing kid to protecting female molestation.”

Still, there were many limitations of the new system to address at this phase as follows.

1. This model was not robust yet. Although they tried to capture 6 AM to 10 PM time window but most of long distance train run on night. Thus, they were missing many important requests from these time durations.
2. This system was mechanical in nature where scanning and processing all request depends on efficiency of staff along with Tweet traffic at that instant. Sometimes important aspect is left out due to human negligence.
3. Twitter has very specific format where all the Tweets will add on wall. It makes very cumbersome to identify main Tweet and its subsequent follow-ups manually.
4. The next issue they faced was increased traffic (thousands per day) of Tweets. It became difficult to handle them by single counter.

Mr. Rajesh member of Twitter cell commented on this initial version as “Initially we are very happy with Twitter cell on being organized unit but we were confused about whether this increased Tweets reflect growing expectation of people or our working system failure irrespective of our effort. We faced huge media criticism on two fronts. Firstly, those unattended and unresolved Tweets brought us tag of information passers and of discretionary attitude. We received sarcastic comments like when minister desires we will act on it otherwise ‘Chalta hai’ (status quo) approach. Second our unskilled staff’s response at retweet were like machine generated, lacking human touch. Our response lacked courtesy, empathy and sensitivity. We became routine answer machine.”

Figure 2-2 | Twitter Seva procedure (original model)



In response to the problems mentioned above, ED R. Kumar took it as new challenge and they revamp this system by August 2016. They adopted additional initiative as follows.

1. They made it 24 by 7 cell which will work round the clock. This step solved missed Tweets problem during earlier absence. Now 'Someone is Watching' is ensured.
2. They increased counters up to 7. But this time they outsourced it to technology savvy people. These people were more trained in communication skills and effective response.
3. Different from the past when the zonal railways were just recommended to have and operate Twitter cell, now all of them were instructed to set up their own Twitter cells and put those handles into effective use. To create self-sustained system, it requires sue moto working of zones. Now it became their responsibility to watch their pending Tweets and close them accordingly.

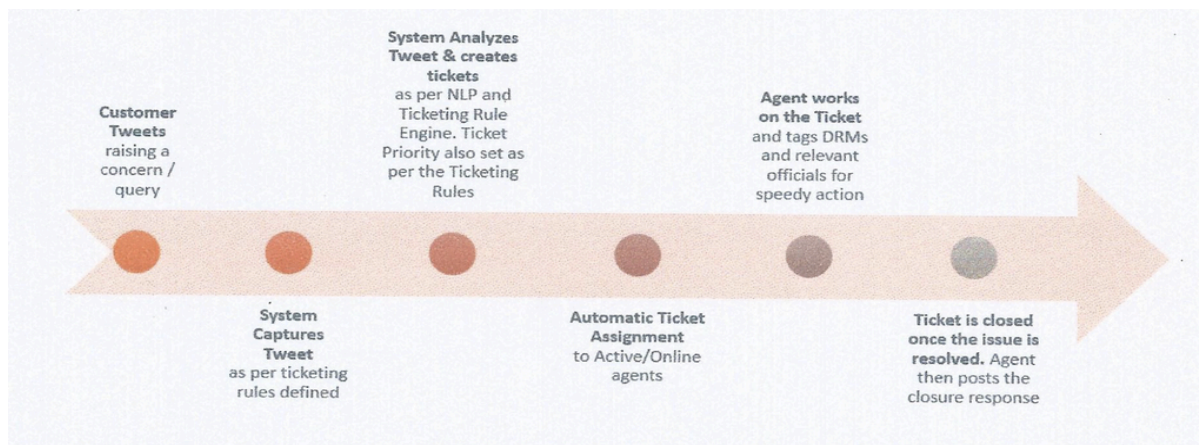
Phase 3: Smart institutionalization of internal coordination

The expanded institutionalization in terms of organizational hardware had to be supported by more sophisticated software. "This new system created one peculiar problem as we are unable to detect whether more than one counter is working on same Tweet issue or not. This overlapping hampered our productivity. Still we were facing Tweet lost problem due to manual tracking under increased traffic condition. There was no closing mechanism. This uncertainty was persistent. We were unable to do effective monitoring, till now we had adopted convention of treating as close if we find retweet from zone. There was neither timeframe to close pending request nor any system to monitor it." said R. Kumar.

To resolve these new challenges, a new social customer relationship management (Social CRM) tool was developed which have many unique advantages to overcome earlier drawbacks as follows.

1. This Social CRM tool ensures effective capturing of relevant tweets and posts based on set of keywords (a query) fed in the system, creates them into individual tickets and helps officials to collaborate on the tools to get the best results from the efforts put in.
2. This tool utilized unique property of Twitter's 140 words limit in identifying type of request. It helped them in prioritization. After capturing the tweets/posts based on keywords in the query, systems robust NPL (Natural language processing) engine first looks into the sentiments of the tweet and marks it as **Positive, Negative or Neutral**. Then the official opens the ticket and reads the tweet. According to whether a ticketed tweet requires any action from railways, the agents/staff also marks it as **Actionable or Non-actionable** ticket. The system prioritizes post as **Normal, High or Urgent** based on the keywords fed to the system and also through system learning. They created a list of words in software like Help, Urgent, Emergency, etc. for top priority. It enhances their working speed of dealing thousands of Tweets per day without missing anyone. They divided all cases into three priority **Top, Medium and Low**. This software scans all Tweets and assigns priority depending upon each category word list.
3. This system worked on round robin scheduling. Each counter is assigned individual Tweet along with recording counter ID to each Tweet. This overcomes the overlapping problem. Now they have all the Tweets in traceable format.
4. This tool helped them in creating token number on each assigned Tweet. For each token number, there is timer system which helps in tracking pending request.
5. This CRM tool helped in creating summary sheet in various flexible modules, which helps them in monitoring and tracking each request status. It has the feature to record the information in customized form, problems areas can be identified by the respective departmental authorities which can enable them to improvise with a view to make the delivery of services better.
6. This monitoring by its statistical parameters among zonal railways created sensitivity and one of the performance indicators.

Figure 2-3 | Twitter Seva procedure (updated model) flow chart



3. Impact and prospect

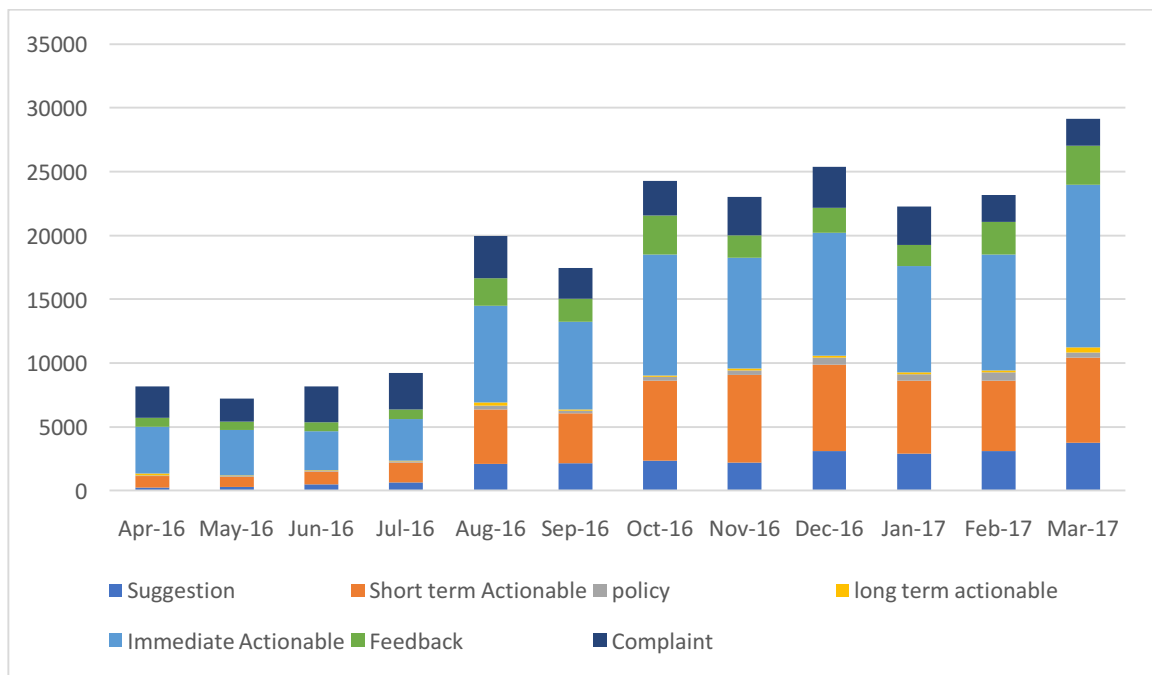
Internal management

As an impact of use of social CRM, the ministry of railway is now able to generate useful insights through various kinds of management information system reports. These (geographical and functional) reports further help to find key areas that are warranting attention and system improvement. Sharing of such reports with Departmental and Geographical Head of departments on weekly, fortnightly and monthly basis helps in effective monitoring.

Table 2-1 | Comparison of the major features of Twitter Seva system: Past vs. Present

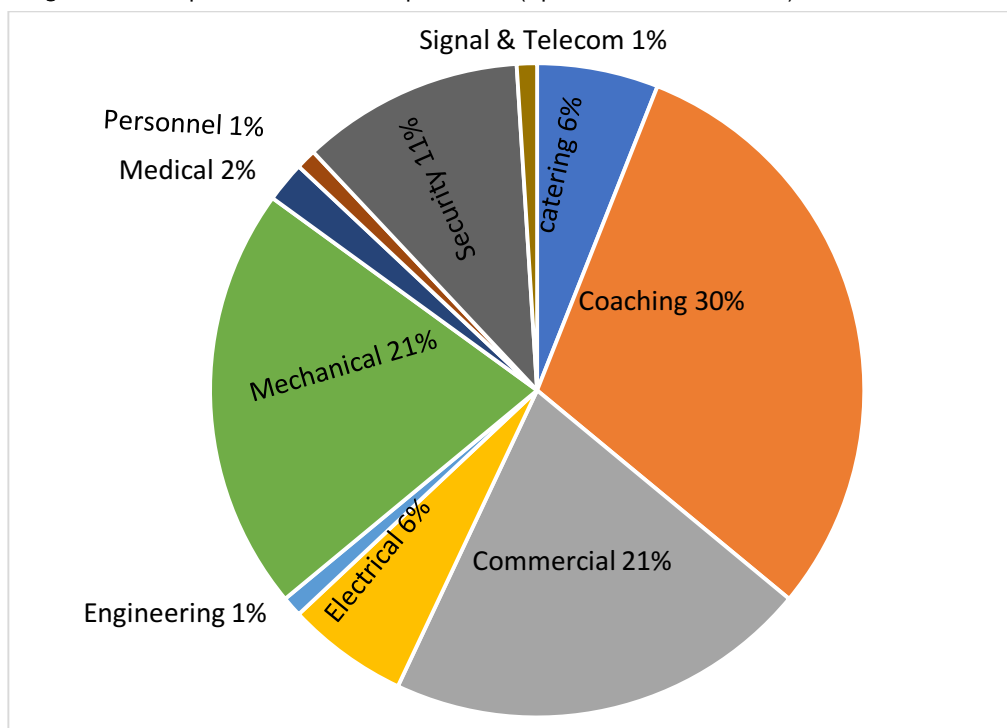
	Past	Present
Management Information System (MIS)	Manually operated	Fully automated
Work flow	Not defined	Automatically assigned
Case tracking	No tracking	Auto filtering
Case missed	Frequent	Almost none
Response time	Very long	200% improvement

Figure 2-4 | Actionable ticket types (Apr.1.2016 – Mar.31.2017)



	Apr 16	May 16	Jun 16	Jul 16	Aug 16	Sep 16	Oct 16	Nov 16	Dec 16	Jan 17	Feb 17	Mar 17
Suggestions	264	309	479	644	2116	2131	2349	2173	3083	2890	3102	3762
Short Term Actionable	869	780	1002	1541	4240	3926	6286	6890	6803	5721	5521	6673
Policy	83	64	79	97	300	199	276	367	558	509	644	414
Long Term Actionable	125	51	42	73	267	124	100	127	110	157	151	397
Immediate Actionable	3677	3529	3047	3249	7552	6833	9511	8693	9672	8304	9082	12737
Feedback	679	689	724	782	2186	1804	3025	1761	1937	1699	2579	3036
Complaint	2476	1817	2808	2831	3310	2412	2704	3033	3231	3006	2073	2115

Figure 2-5 | Department wise breakup of tickets (Apr.1.2016 – Mar.31.2017)



This exercise helped Indian railways in analysing shortcoming and areas to focus for better service provision. It works as barometer to check its performance in reference to desired outcome. During year 2016-17 statistics shows Railways need to focus more on Coaching, Mechanical and Commercial issues which are ultimately affecting citizens. This mechanism put citizens in forefront to audit and review ministry performance.

External accountability

All activities of receiving complaints, forwarding to the concerned authority and relevant senior officials, taking actions and getting feedback of passengers are within public domain. The tweets forwarded to the concerned authority and action taken by them automatically get recorded in the system which can be retrieved for future reference ensuring complete accountability. Time and again this system has shown examples of social auditing, where citizens' complaints on any delay/inaction on the part of any authority resulted in corrective gesture/action by the authority in charge. The general public have been also sharing tweets/posts in social media regarding the incidents of corruption by uploading videos/photos, etc. which immediately come to the notice of authorities and suitable action is taken. It has been proven to be deterrent for staff to desist from activities of corruption.

Citizen engagement and trust

This effective system created new notion among citizen as “Power of Tweet”. This tool in the hands of citizen made them collaborative partner in effective service delivery. Citizens utilize it as tool for taking proactive action for bringing something in notice to government, discussing and analyzing government initiatives and finally empowering citizen in the democracy for ultimate objective of good governance.

The power of tweet is seen and applauded by media and citizen in various occasions and there are a few to quote:

Crisis management: Acting on passenger tweet, trapped people were rescued from train accident.

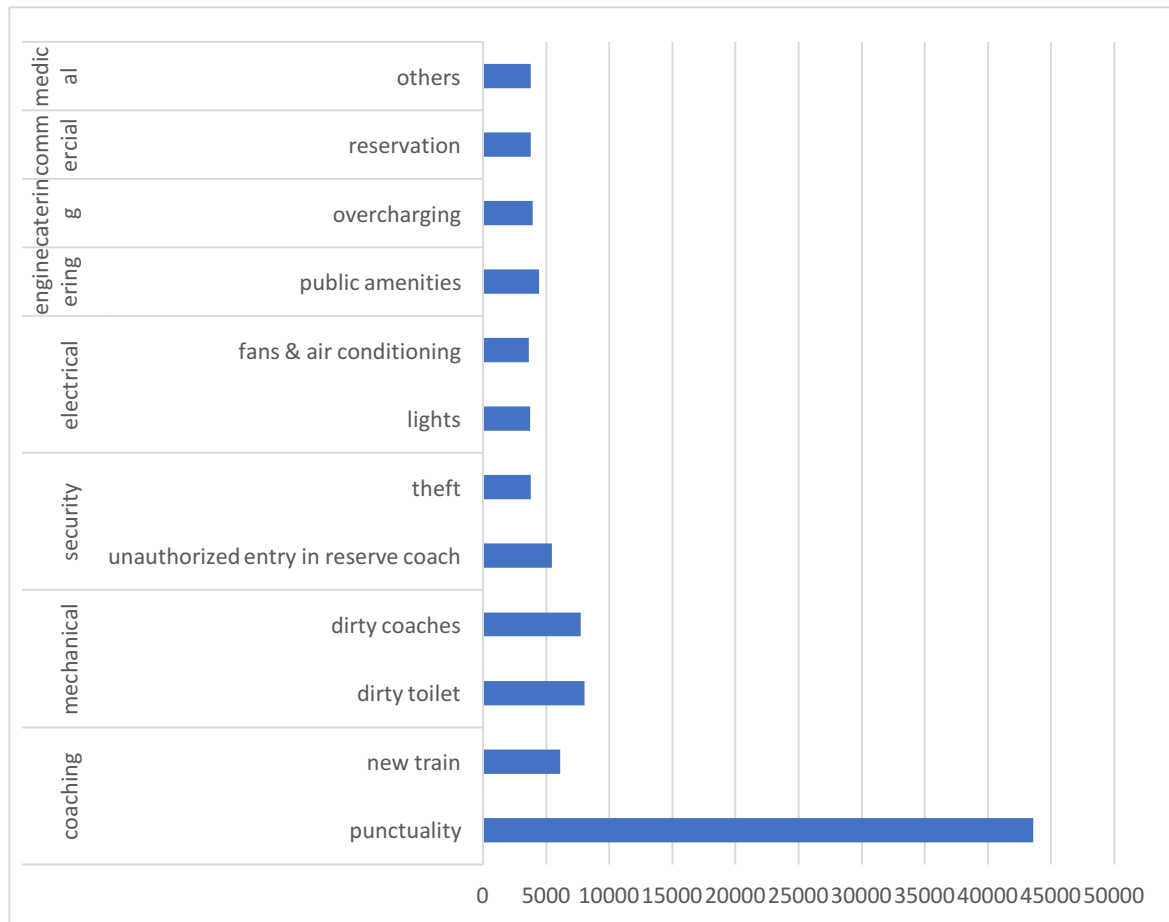
People's participation: Passenger amenities were relocated as per citizen suggestion which earlier were not under effective utilization.

Good governance: Promptly acting and solving citizen grievances and ensuring officials accountability.

Transparency: Citizen can seek information and question the Ministry on its action. Everything is visible to everyone.

Real time resolution: It ensured people's trust in government. They felt “we are heard.”

Figure 2-6 | Top issues/complaints (Apr.1.2016 – Mar.31.2017)



While Punctuality and Dirty toilets were major contributors in citizen's dissatisfaction. This evidence based management where citizens auditing and constructive contribution created a sense of accountability among railway management. In return Railways responsiveness generated trust among citizens towards government.

Figure 2-7 | Top issues zone wise (Apr.1.2016 – Mar.31.2017)

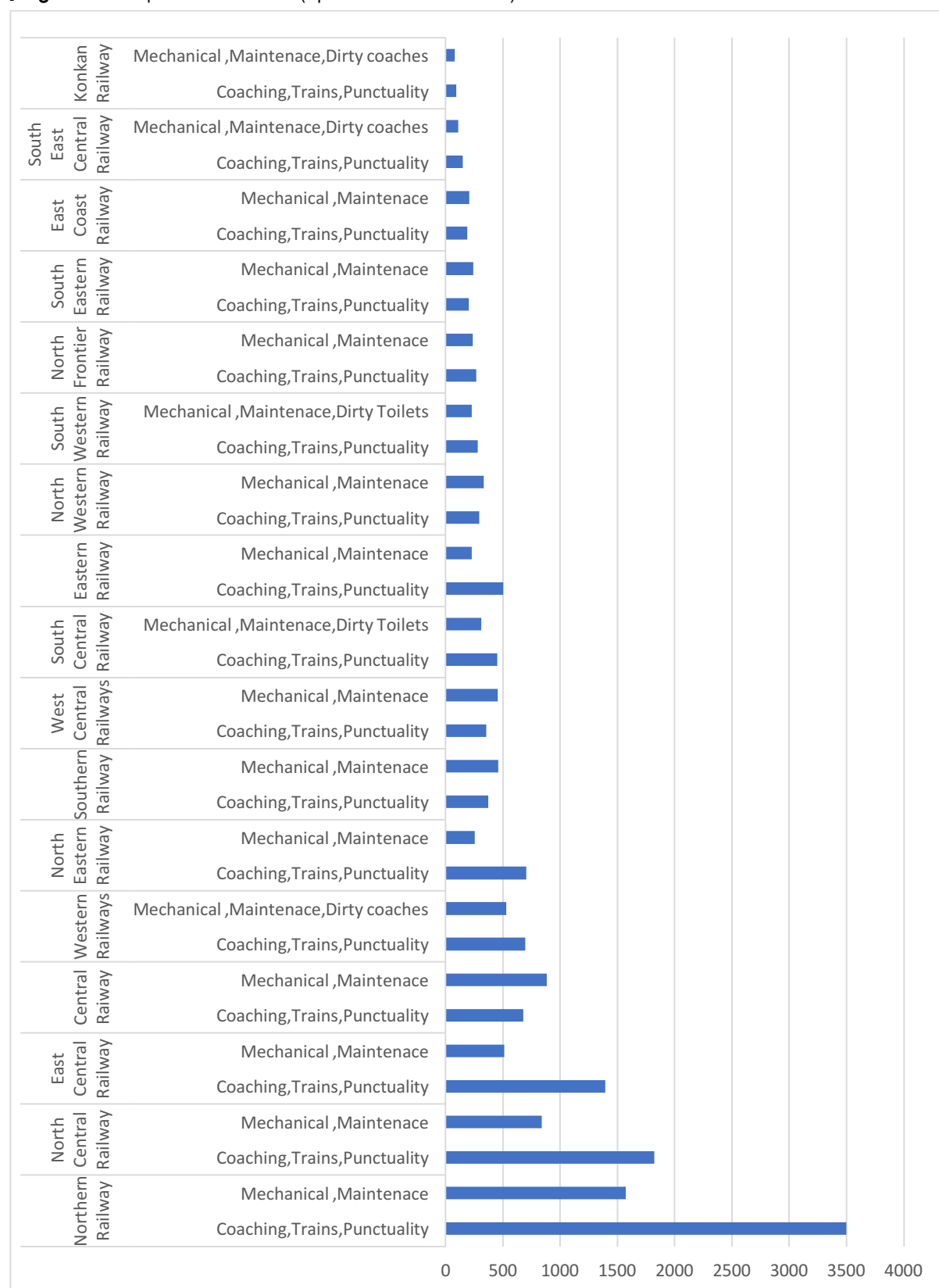
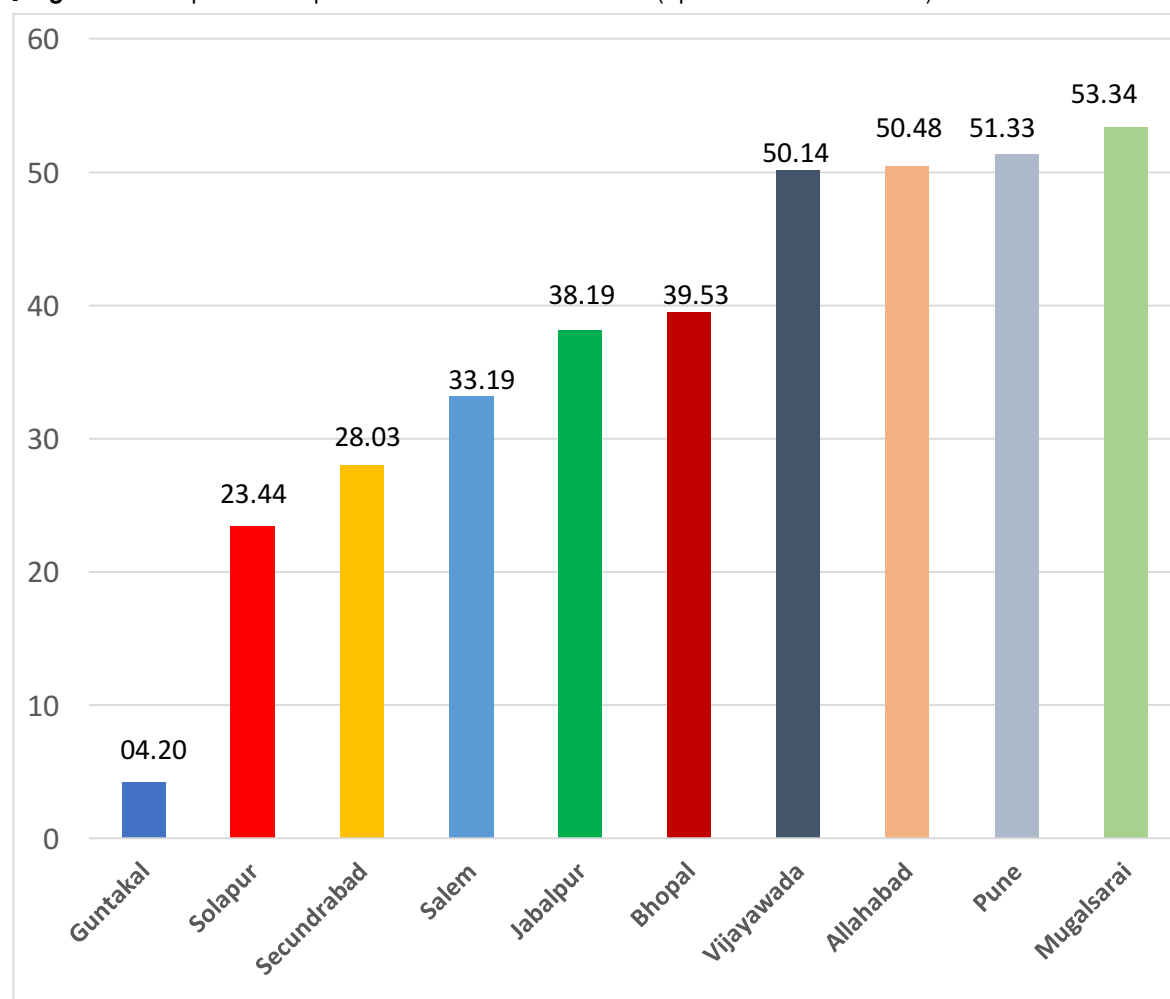


Figure 2-8 | Top 10 first response time of divisions in minutes (Apr.1.2016 – Mar.31.2017)



All Railways divisions have been monitored regularly in their response time to raised concern on social media platform. This report is utilized as key performance indicators for divisions responsiveness. The infused competition among divisions helped in enhancing customer service despite organization's monopolistic nature under administrative control of government.

A roadmap for future

With multichannel source for customer engagement, a system cannot work efficiently without unified integrated common platform where communication with customers can be arranged and monitored.

The integrated dashboard for Twitter, Facebook, Instagram (RailMinIndia) and You-tube (Ministry of railways-India) are to be developed and added into complaint management system.

Next step would be to bring all other channels of complaint redressal machinery over Indian railways, viz., Complaint Management System (COMS), Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring Management System (CPGRAMS), Helplines into the integrated dashboard under the same platform.

To facilitate general public, all channels of lodging complaints/suggestions will be brought under single mobile application.

4. Lessons and implications for the Science of Delivery

The IR case shows how the policy process regarding public transportation can be analyzed and interpreted from the perspective of the Science of Delivery framework. The whole process consists of multiple stages where IR had to deal with diverse challenges at every different phase as below. (See Annex D for the details.)

Policy goal: Voice & accountability

As a public service provider, IR's initial objective of reform was to enhance its accountability. The large amount of demands from passengers had to be handled more comprehensively and systematically. For that purpose, the voices of customers had to be listened to more carefully.

Policy leverages at Phase 1: Stakeholder engagement using information & communication technology

The objective to enhance the responsiveness to passengers was somewhat self-evident for a public corporation. However, when it comes to the means to achieve the goal, there were various courses of action. IR's choice was to engage passengers in the management process more intimately by using information and communication technology. IR decided to provide a new venue—social media—where passengers may access IR's decision making process very conveniently and thereby contribute to the betterment of the service.

Policy leverages at Phase 2: Leadership, HR, organizational capacity

Such revolutionary approach of engaging citizens in the service reform would not have been possible without the strong initiative of the leadership. The new minister took a lead in launching the social media-based customer service. And such top-down approach made it easier to allocate human resources and also equip organizational capacities necessary for the new service.

Policy leverages at Phase 3: Roles, responsibilities, priorities

Even after the institutionalization of the social media-based service, more steps remained to be taken. The new staff, technology, and operating procedure had to be fine-tuned for a higher efficiency. The redundant and overlapped system was also accompanied by many missing gaps in service which IR is supposed to fill. So the staff and their tasks were re-organized, streamlined, integrated, and prioritized. Such sophisticated innovations will continue because the environment surrounding IR will be ever-changing.

I References I

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7. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihAjNuP11ME>

| Annexes |

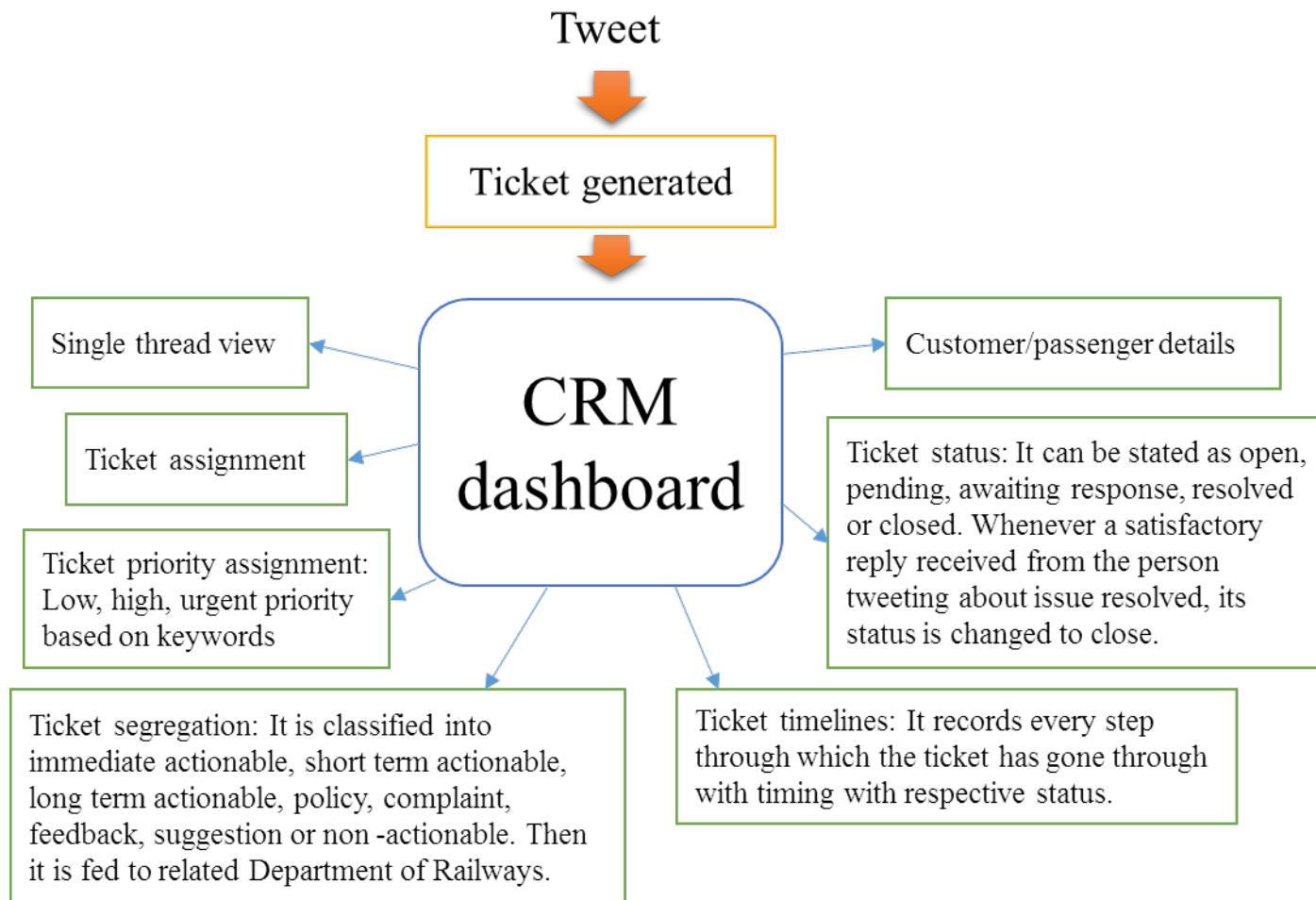
Annex A. Interviewees list

1. Mr. Ravinesh Kumar, Executive Director (Public Grievances), Railway Board, New Delhi
2. Mr. Vedprakash, Director (I&B), Railway Board, New Delhi
3. Dr. R. Badrinarayan (Divisional Railway Manager, Howrah Division, Eastern Railway)
4. Team members of social media cell at Railway Board, New Delhi

Annex B. List of sample keywords in WORD-CLOUD for prioritizing and categorizing tweets

Categories	Keywords
Urgent	theft, missing, medical, rape, accident, security, poison, collapsed, unconscious, wheel-chair, danger, dead, death, fire, harass, urgent, serious, trouble, terrorist, robbery, serious, drunk, police, first aid, emergency, snatch, fainted, derailment, injured, doctor, bleeding, hurt, suffer, misbehave, pain, fever
Security: urgent	beaten, beggar, rpf, lost, theft, stone pelting, hawker, anti-social, illegal, stabbing, knife, pistol, murder, dacoit, robbery, gun, passenger-missing, luggage lost, extortion, kidnapping, trafficking, afraid, suspect, insecure, tease, drugged, railway police
Medical: urgent	medical, heart, stomach, headache, pain, blood, vomit, fever, oxygen, asthma, attack, patient, medicine, injury, cancer
High priority	arthritis, bedroll, birth, cigarette, cockroach, corruption, worried, seat, cooling, milk, dirty, air-conditioning, clean, fan, disturbance, bedsheet, extra charge, no water, no pantry, hot, rat, gandagi*
Low priority	punctual, vendor, platform, announcement, attention, staff, littering, station, lighting, attention, ticket examiner, no train, quality, reservation, shatabdi,

*Various Hindi language words are added either in Hindi or in Roman script



Annex D. Process map (based on the delivery challenge taxonomy)

delivery challenge taxonomy	initial challenge and intervention		Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3	
	Development challenge	initial intervention	delivery challenge	learning & adapted intervention	delivery challenge	learning & adapted intervention	delivery challenge	learning & adapted intervention
	gap b/w users demands and services	proactive citizen engagement to improve services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> external: volume of Tweets internal: incapable staff, unsystematic approach 	institutionalization (HR, governance, and system)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> external: diverse demands internal: costs of prioritization 	expanded institutionalization of external services (more seamless, decentralized, outsourced, and standardized Twitter operation)	internal: role conflicts	smart institutionalization of internal coordination (CRM using pre-designated request categories, specified responsibility)
stakeholder								
coordination & engagement								
roles & responsibilities			confusing division of labor			seamless 'round the clock' system, more decentralized and standardized Twitter cells operation	overlapping, confusing roles	"counter-Tweet" match for enhancing accountability
stakeholder engagement		engaging users to improve service						users' requests based on pre-designated categories
inter & intra-governmental relations			confusing, competing priorities		confusing, competing priorities			
commitment & leadership								
change in leadership & administration		new minister revamps organization		new governance (Executive Director of Public Grievance)				
change in priorities or lack of commitment			confusing, competing priorities		confusing, competing priorities			simplify and systemize the users' requests categories
human resources & organizational capacity								

		skilled manpower			unprecedented and inexperienced manpower	involving professional computer operator	unprofessional staff	outsourcing to ICT savvy people		
		organizational capacity			not systematic, but manual and discretionary approach	systematic approach (team-based, streamlined process)		outsourcing to ICT savvy people		
context										
		governance & politics								
		voice & accountability	huge expectation of users		too much Tweets from users		too diverse demands from users			
		basic infrastructure								
		information & communication technology		proactive intervention using ICT						new CRM
project										
		project design								
		overambitious objectives								
		time allocation or task sequencing			confusing priorities					
		stakeholder selection								
		beneficiary targeting					too diverse demands from users, confusing priorities			
project finance										
		budgeting				more support to Twitter Seva		more support to Twitter Seva		
		auditing								
project data & monitoring										
		indicators		visible and tangible indicators thanks to ICT	confusing interpretation of the indicators					standardizing users' requests categories
		data availability & baselines								standardizing users' requests categories

		reporting & supervisions								counter-Tweet' match for enhancing accountability
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